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This article by Jiayou Luo et al. reminds us that even in countries with a large population, children with very traditional values end up being the victims of changes in work patterns, migration, and social norms. This article suggests that children who are attended by nonparents—either grandparents or other relatives—face less care and many nutrition problems, such as low intake of some nutrients and poor physical development related to nutritional status. The authors suggest that nutrition is the key factor and recommend nutritional intervention programs to improve the children's living conditions. However, in Spain, work by Bel et al.¹ showed an important proportion of children with significant growth retardation upon entering a foster home, although significant catch-up growth was observed at the end of their stay. Growth failure in this population did not appear to be related to nutritional status.

While this article does make the case for nutrition being most affected by the setting upon being left behind, it also raises the important issue of how a society like China, which is changing so rapidly, overlooks some of the basic tenets of family life. It also highlights how ill-prepared China seems to be in safeguarding its most vulnerable citizens from such basic rights as a healthy diet and a safe and nurturing environment.² Changes in labor patterns directly affect social patterns, and traditional villages and small cities are not immune from their direct effects on children's well-being.

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THE STATUS OF CARE AND NUTRITION OF 774 LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN IN RURAL AREAS IN CHINA

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Left-behind children are a special population in Chinese rural areas that refers to the children who are living with one parent or extended family while the other parent(s) is/are absent from home. Since China's reform and opening to the outside world, the restriction of population floating between urban and rural areas has been broken. The scale of spare labor force transferring from rural areas to cities is expanding persistently. Until 2005, the number of floating populations in China had reached nearly 147 million.¹ At the same time, the number of left-behind children has also been increasing. According to the 2000 China Census,

the number of left-behind children aged 14 years and younger in China was estimated at 22.9 million, which suggests that left-behind children have become a huge population, especially in rural areas.²

When parents are unable to take care of their children, the responsibility falls to the grandparents.³ One study reported that in 2002, 59% of children in kinship care lived with grandparents, 19% lived with aunts and uncles, and 22% lived with other relatives in America.⁴ Another study reported that in 2000, only 43.8% of the observed children lived with one biological parent when the other was out of home in the total number of the studied subpopulation, while 56.2% of the children lived with their grandparents.²

Recently, the number of studies on the education, mental health, behavior, and personality of children in kinship care has increased. It has been reported that children in kinship care are more likely to feel indifferent, introverted, inferior, and unsociable; more likely to have psychological problems, learning disabilities, and difficulties getting along with others; more likely to smoke, drink excessively, abuse drugs, and skip school; and even more likely to commit crimes.⁵⁻⁸

In China, many studies have suggested that left-behind children have substantial needs. It was reported